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Implementation of the UNECE Statistical Programme 2016

Addendum

Report of the Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA)

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The second Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) was held on 3-4 October 2016 in Geneva.

The addendum is the report of that Seminar and is provided to inform the Conference of European Statisticians on the implementation of the UNECE Statistical Programme 2016 in regards to its outcomes and recommendations.

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I. Introduction

1. The Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) was held in Geneva on 3-4 October 2016. It was jointly organized with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and an organising committee with members from Australia, Canada, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Sweden and Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat).

2. Experts from the following countries attended the meeting: Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mongolia, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, South Africa, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States of America.

3. Also representatives of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), Eurostat, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO), the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the World Bank, and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) attended the meeting.

4. The non-governmental organizations Institute Cadaster and Luc Hoffmann Institute/WWF International were also represented at the meeting.

5. From the private sector, Aether Espana SL attended the meeting.

II. Organization of the seminar

6. Mr. K. Roberts (Statistics Canada) chaired the seminar.

7. The participants adopted the agenda of the seminar.

8. The following substantive topics were discussed at the seminar:

   a) Session 1: Overview on activities of international organizations

   b) Session 2: SEEA and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

   c) Session 3: Applications of SEEA and their communication.

   d) Session 4: Implementation of SEEA modules: challenges and solutions

      i. Session 4a: Energy and air emission accounts

      ii. Session 4b: Environmental taxes and subsidies.

   e) Session 5: Conclusions and recommendations for future work

   f) On 3 October 2016, a lunchtime presentation on Earth Observation for Ecosystem Accounting (EO4EA) was given by the co-chair of the GEO Program Board.

9. Session Chairs were Mr. A. de la Fuente (Eurostat, session 1), Mr. K. Roberts (Statistics Canada, session 2), Mr. M. Lound (Australian Bureau of Statistics, first part of session 3), Mr. M. Wright (Statistics Canada, second part of session 3), Mr. G. Eding (Statistics Netherlands, session 4a), Ms. K. Ben Daher (Statistics Sweden, session 4b) and Mr. P. van de Ven (OECD, session 5).

III. Summary of the discussion and main conclusions reached at the meeting

A. Session 1: Overview on activities of international organizations

10. The session informed about current and planned activities of international organizations related to SEEA implementation in the CES member countries, covering the activities of Eurostat, FAO, the Group Earth Observation (GEO), the International Energy Agency (IEA), OECD, UNDP, UNECE, UNEP, UNESCAP, UNSD, and the World Bank. Furthermore, the chair of the London Group on Environmental Accounting (LG) provided a summary of the main outcomes of the London Group meeting held on 28-30 September 2016.

11. The seminar participants considered continuation of taking stock of international organizations' activities in the region (e.g., in form of a regularly updated inventory) very important. Furthermore, coordination of SEEA-related capacity building is considered crucial, as the relevant activities of international organizations in the UNECE region address different country groups that partly overlap.

12. The secretariat presented the first ideas for developing a regional SEEA implementation strategy. The strategy will take into account the global SEEA implementation strategy, the Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics (FDES) Blueprint for Action as well as strategies and activities of other international organizations in the region. It will form the basis for a regional SEEA implementation plan and capacity building activities.

B. Session 2: SEEA and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

13. The session considered the conceptual links between SEEA and the SDG indicators, and how SEEA could be further promoted in the context of measuring and monitoring SDGs. UNSD made a presentation in this session.

14. In 2014 the Statistical Commission has "recognized SEEA as an important statistical framework for the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals indicators" (Report of the forty-fifth session). The System of National Accounts (SNA) and SEEA are statistical standards that can be used to monitor a number of environmental-economic SDG indicators in an integrated way.

15. Closer cooperation with the custodian agencies responsible for SDG indicators related to economy and environment is needed, to further promote the use of SEEA in the context of SDGs. A small subgroup of the UNCEEA will develop a strategy for promoting SEEA in the context of the SDGs and in statistics related to climate change, in particular concerning the methodologies and capacity building at the national level.

16. National Statistical Offices should be the focal points for all SDG indicators in countries, but coordinating and re-organizing existing data flows is a major challenge. Notwithstanding these challenges, it is considered important to make progress on this issue, as currently, in addition to official statistics, the information to compile SDG indicators is often produced by agencies outside the national statistical system. The role of NSOs in integrating the information in the SEEA framework was considered particularly important for the elevation of environmental information to the level of official statistics that meet the quality standards and are produced on a regular basis.

17. In the opinion of participants, the development of international databases with SEEA data is very important to promote a wider user of SEEA.

18. Building capacity and development of tools to support countries in the compilation of the accounts was also considered of primary importance.

C. Session 3: Applications of SEEA and their communication

19. The session on applications and communication of SEEA discussed examples from Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Eurostat presented the use of SEEA for resource efficiency policies in Europe and the Word Bank gave a presentation on challenges and opportunities related to Natural Capital Accounting.

20. The key success factors for better engaging with users (such as policy makers) are communication and the characteristics of the data offered by the statistical system.

21. The seminar participants agreed that it is challenging to engage with policymakers to demonstrate the value of the SEEA framework. SEEA is not being used to its full potential. In some areas, there is more information on offer than is currently demanded by policy makers. However, many countries noted an increasing interest in the accounts and their use in decision making.

22. For ensuring successful engagement of users, it was agreed that especially the following is needed: (a) "demystifying" SEEA accounts for users, as they are often seen as too complex; (b) extensive and persistent networking that showcases what can be done with SEEA data; (c) clear and concise communication through a range of media to get the message out to the user community; (d) securing "champions" to assist in delivering the message to users, and (e) having timely data available to support policy questions.

23. SEEA is communicated through a range of channels including traditional publications, web sites, seminars and conferences, social media and advisory groups. Nevertheless, several participants noted that SEEA is less known than other areas of statistics.

24. Engaging with Public Relations Departments and putting in place a clear communication strategy are considered important. Some countries have already gained experience with different communication channels for SEEA products, but in most countries this is still at an early stage of development.

25. Open data policies can help to get the attention of users.

26. Users often ask for data sets which are complete, and can be disaggregated into industries and subnational areas. One important challenge in this respect may be related to statistical confidentiality.

27. Integration of accounts provides benefits for users, but they are often not aware of it.

28. Users may not be interested in certain modules, because they are used to use other sources of information. NSOs have to analyse what they are going to lose in case they suspend modules.

29. Some countries noted that in cases where there is a clear user demand, this also helped to implement measures to improve timeliness of the accounts.

30. As policy analysts and researchers are often interested in international comparisons and benchmarking, efforts should be strengthened to have certain SEEA accounts produced by a majority of countries.

31. It was noted that policy needs should be anticipated to the extent possible, to be able to adequately prepare the compilation of relevant statistics and accounts, which often may take a longer period of time.

32. Another important point is to ensure the integration and consistency across SEEA accounts, because this is one of the major assets of SEEA.

33. Developing global datasets must be a priority. Air emission accounts, energy accounts, material flow accounts and land accounts were mentioned as areas for which conditions are favourable to get started. UNCEEA has already embarked on this path.

D. Session 4: Implementation of SEEA modules: challenges and solutions

34. The session discussed challenges and solutions concerning the implementation of air emission accounts, energy accounts (in the first part of the session), and environmental taxes and subsidies (in the second part of the session).

35. The session on energy and air emission accounts considered practical examples and country experiences in the implementation of the different modules. Four presentations were given, starting with an introduction on the (SEEA) principles of the energy and air emission accounts by the Netherlands, followed by a presentation by OECD discussing possible approaches to provide first estimates of CO_2 emission accounts according to SEEA for countries that do not yet compile them. Denmark and Kazakhstan presented country experiences and lessons learned.

36. The second part of the session on environmental taxes and subsidies provided an overview of conceptual, methodological and practical implementation aspects based on national examples from Italy and Sweden. OECD gave a presentation on the estimation of the volume of fossil fuel subsidies.

37. Energy and air emission accounts are often amongst the first SEEA accounts to be developed by countries, mainly due to their clear policy use and related user demands. In many cases they are "low hanging fruits", as in general quite a lot of data are available from energy balances, greenhouse gas emission inventories and inventories of air pollutants to compile these accounts. Accounts on environmental taxes and subsidies are less often produced.

38. Countries face a range of practical problems in compiling the accounts, mainly related to combining information from different data sources, with different data owners. Other challenges concern methodological issues, such as data interpolation to fill in the missing information.

39. All given examples showed that even with imperfect data it is possible to compile accounts that provide users with valuable and fit for purpose information. The start should be an assessment of available data and policy needs. This can provide a solid basis for defining future work programs for implementing the accounts.

40. When compiling the accounts for the first time it is best to move forward in a practical manner and start with the source information that is readily available. Subsequently, practical solutions to complete the missing information (e.g. using alternative data sources or proxies) can be developed. Using benchmark information from other countries or regions to fill in the missing data could be a feasible alternative.

41. A constant dialogue with the main users is very important in this process, to keep the gradual development of the accounts aligned with the users' needs and ensure that the resulting accounts are fit for purpose.

42. Understanding the nature of the underlying source statistics, their production process and methods, and building up good relationships between source data producers and environmental accountants are considered key for a successful development of SEEA accounts.

43. Seminar participants emphasised that the exchange of experiences and lessons learned is very useful and valuable and should be followed up in future, e.g. by special sessions at the next seminars and/or other (electronic) information exchange mechanisms.

E. Session 5: Conclusions and recommendations for future work

44. The session discussed and agreed on the main outcomes and decisions for further work, as presented below.

45. Joint OECD/UNECE Seminars on the Implementation of SEEA should continue to allow for exchange of practical experience, advancing the implementation, and discussing coordination issues among international agencies involved in SEEA-related work in the UNECE region. These seminars should be complementary to other international initiatives in this area.

46. The participants recommended that UNECE also uses this forum to identify the SEEA priority settings in the countries (e.g. with a survey to NSOs), and to develop a regional SEEA implementation plan. The plan should (a) contribute to the global SEEA implementation strategy, (b) take into consideration the identified priority setting, and (c) support the production of indicators for important global policy initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

47. The next Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of SEEA should be held in about a year's time, depending on the progress made in SEEA implementation and new developments that need to be discussed. Possible dates for the next seminar are 2-3 October 2017.

48. The organizing committee will consider how to better structure the future seminars to focus the different sessions more clearly on strategic issues, monitoring progress in implementation of the regional and national work plans, exchange of experience, links with other initiatives, etc.

49. The participants see a need to produce some tangible outputs from the seminars that would help countries in the practical implementation of SEEA. These outputs should be aligned with and complementary to outputs provided by UNSD and Eurostat, and could consist of the following:

(a) collecting and sharing good practices (success stories) and lessons learned in the implementation, communication and use of SEEA;

(b) providing concrete country examples on policy applications of SEEA;

(c) developing further guidance to assess the readiness to compile certain SEEA-accounts, taking into consideration the diagnostic tool for the SEEA Central Framework and the SEEA technical notes, and building on the global assessment carried out by UNSD under the auspices of UNCEEA;

(d) continue to keep participants updated on SEEA-related activities of international organizations in the UNECE region.

50. The format of future seminars should allow to:

(a) monitor and bring forward the regional and national SEEA implementation plans;

(b) inform about activities and outcomes of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA);

(c) discuss new developments, such as the extensions of SEEA modules;

(d) provide a forum to support the coordination of SEEA-related activities of international organizations;

(e) allow exchange of knowledge and experience on difficult issues related to the implementation of SEEA.

51. Some topics that could be considered at the next SEEA seminar are communication on the results that can be derived from SEEA, and improving the quality of energy and air emission accounts.